RESEARCH HIGHLIGHT

September 2007

Socio-economic Series 07-017

Supportive Housing for Homeless and Hard-to-House Seniors: An In-depth Case Study

INTRODUCTION

Supportive housing for seniors has become commonplace in Canada within the last decade. It typically combines:

- self-contained, private apartments,
- common areas to encourage residents' social interaction, and
- an array of support services, such as one meal per day and assistance with the activities of daily living.

What is not commonplace is the provision of supportive housing to seniors who are homeless, hard-to-house,[1] or have complex health problems, including mental illness and addictions.

In 2002-2003, CMHC funded Housing Options for Elderly or Chronically Ill Shelter Users,[2] a national, exploratory study to learn about what sorts of housing options existed for homeless seniors in Canada. The study found 13 housing projects in five different regions of the country. It also identified an ideal supportive housing model: a building located away from the downtown core, with 30-50 small, self-contained units, several common areas, and staff available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, who take a holistic approach to client-centred care. In this ideal scenario, clients would include both males and females and would be treated with respect.

Fairway Woods, a 32-apartment housing project providing 24 hours a day, seven days a week support services and located in suburban Langford, near Victoria, British Columbia, was one of the housing projects identified in the 2002-2003 national study. The project was identified as a possible best-practice example, matched the ideal supportive housing model for homeless seniors, and was considered by housing and health care professionals in the Greater Victoria area as a great success. The study team, therefore, suggested that documentation be developed on the Fairway Woods project.

Figure 1 The front entrance at Fairway Woods

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1 "Hard-to-house" is defined in the Objectives section of this Research Highlight.

2 The Research Highlight of this study can be found at http://www.cmhc.ca/od/?pid=63296

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OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this study was to conduct an in-depth case study of Fairway Woods.

The specific objectives were to:

- fill the gaps in our knowledge relating to housing for homeless and hard-to-house seniors,
- provide an in-depth description of a purpose-designed housing project that is considered to be a success,
- answer important questions that emerged from the 2002-2003 national study (for example, Is a suburban location acceptable to the intended tenants?), and
- report on the findings in a way that is comprehensible, meaningful and inspirational to a wide range of professionals.

For the study, the following definitions are used:

Homeless describes someone who is literally or visibly homeless, that is, living on the street, in temporary shelters or in a location not meant for human habitation.

Hard-to-house refers to persons who are repeatedly evicted or at constant risk of homelessness, usually due to behaviours which are not tolerated in many housing or care settings.

A **social model of care** is characterized by congregate living arrangements that are residential in scale and character, and service provision that is client-centred and respectful of clients' autonomy and sense of home.

METHODOLOGY

The in-depth case study of Fairway Woods was conducted between September 2006 and July 2007. The research methods included:

- reviewing relevant documents, records and floor plans,
- conducting a series of group interviews and formal and informal one-to-one interviews,
- carrying out a quality of life survey of the tenants, and
- conducting site observations and taking photographs.

Study informants included the project sponsor (the Victoria Cool Aid Society) and other people involved in the development of the project, regional health policy makers, the project architect, the builder, on-site and visiting service providers, project residents and surrounding neighbours.

FINDINGS

Fairway Woods was specially designed and built for formerly homeless and hard-to-house seniors by the Victoria Cool Aid Society, a well respected 39-year old organization that provides shelter, health and housing services to marginalized persons living in the Victoria, BC region.

Location, Site and Building

Fairway Woods is located on a busy, suburban, main street. It is an attractive apartment building clad in siding and surrounded by soaring fir trees and lush landscaping. The building sits on the slightly sloped, rocky corner of a large property owned by the regional health authority. Next door on the same property, but not easily visible because of the slope of the land, are three modern, single storey care facilities. Within 50 metres (160 feet) of the front door of Fairway Woods are bus shelters for service to downtown in one direction or to the nearest suburban mall in the other direction. Across the street is a small plaza, with health clinic, health testing services, a pharmacy and a café. Other amenities, such as a grocery store, are within a three-block walk.

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Figure 2 Fairway Woods

In the building, there are 32 self-contained, one-bedroom apartments, a communal dining room, two lounges, two balconies and a library for the tenants. There is also a large kitchen, visible from the dining room, and various offices for staff. Outside, there is a groomed garden both at the front and back.

Tenants

Although the tenant profile varies over time, as some tenants leave and others arrive, there are some fairly constant characteristics. Approximately three quarters of the tenants are men; the rest are women. The median age group is 55-64 years. Over half of the tenants are dependent on welfare; others live on pension income. The tenants moved to Fairway Woods from a variety of living arrangements, including a detoxification facility, hospital, other Cool Aid housing projects, shelters and substandard housing. A majority of the tenants have multiple and complex diagnoses, which include mental illness and addictions, as well as physical health problems associated with age, such as arthritis, heart problems and diabetes.

In October 2006, over half the tenants had been in continuous residence at Fairway Woods since it opened in July 2003, and another nine tenants had lived there one to three years. Turnover is small: between 2003 and 2006, two tenants were asked to leave and four left voluntarily. Others died or moved to facility care.

Services and Service Providers

The following kinds of services are provided to tenants at Fairway Woods.

1. On-site services are provided by Cool Aid employees 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Staff assist in difficult situations, provide help with the instrumental activities of daily living (such as helping with medical appointments, tax forms, getting bus passes, etc.), and prepare and serve one communal full meal daily to the tenants.
2. Clustered home care services are provided by Community Health Care Workers from the regional health authority. They provide scheduled assistance with activities of daily living (such as in-suite meal preparation and personal care) to those tenants in need.
3. Other visiting services, such as home nursing and psychiatric social work, are provided to tenants on an as-needed basis.

Figure 3 The dining room, flooded with natural light

Project Development

Fairway Woods is a creative project that took eight years to complete. Its design and operations are based on a philosophy of respect for all human beings and on a social model of care. Its success appears to be the result of a combination of factors, including the following:

- the cumulative effect of Cool Aid's experience in providing housing and support to homeless persons over many years,
- the personal passion and commitment of a range of individuals, including Cool Aid personnel, health authority visionaries and decision-makers, the project architect and the builder,

- the selection of stellar staff members, and
- the selection and support of appropriate tenants.

Impacts of Fairway Woods on Tenants' Quality of Life

Tenants were asked to rate their quality of life in January 2007 by completing a one-page, anonymous questionnaire which included 12 indicators of quality of life (such as physical health, mood, living situation, family relationships, etc.) Overall, their self-rated quality of life was "good." Over half rated their physical health as good or excellent; almost three quarters rated their mood as fair or good; and almost three quarters rated their living situation as good or excellent.

Figure 4 The tenants' lounge

In confidential, one-to-one interviews, 10 tenants described some of the impacts of moving to Fairway Woods on the quality of their lives. Previously, they had moved in and out of apartments, motels, hostels, psychiatric hospitals, detoxification centres and group homes. At some stage, each one had been homeless. Before moving to Fairway Woods, many of them felt "anxious," "angry," "isolated" and "stuck" much of the time. A typical 24-hour day was described as "lonely and a waste of time." Since moving to Fairway Woods, they have stability in their lives. Although not all of their troubles have disappeared, they feel "relieved," "more secure" and glad that their chronic conditions are "under control." They are "drinking less," "socializing more," "more confident," "getting more exercise" and "sleeping better. They rarely see "bad company." Their self-rated coping skills have escalated.

The four aspects of Fairway Woods that contribute most to the tenants' quality of life are:

- the quiet, suburban setting,
- the predictability of everyday life,
- the proximity of shops and services, and
- the social aspects, such as the daily communal meal.

Tenants also value having service staff on site 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This increases their sense of security and connectedness. One tenant said, "I'm living happily ever after." Another said, "Many have had rough lives; now we're in smoother waters."

Impacts of Fairway Woods on "the System"

Service providers claim that moving to Fairway Woods has had significant impacts on several aspects of tenants' lives, including increased health, greater autonomy and healthier social relationships, and decreased substance abuse. They also perceived a decrease in the use of expensive, publicly-funded services, such as ambulances, emergency room visits, doctor appointments and calls to police.

Impacts of Fairway Woods on Neighbours

The building and its tenants are accepted in the neighbourhood. Neighbours say: "It's a very attractive building and blends in well with the neighbourhood." The tenants are described as "very congenial."

The Built Environment at Fairway Woods

Service providers' and tenants' evaluations of the built environment at Fairway Woods are highly positive, overall. The only consistent critiques are about: (1) the elevator, which is unreliable and noisy; (2) the dining room, because it is very noisy at mealtime; and (3) the vertical noise transfer within the building, especially between communal spaces and private spaces. Shortcomings within the tenants' apartments are minor and easily resolved.

CONCLUSION

There have been many lessons learned from Fairway Woods. The most outstanding are the following.

- "The location in the suburbs works."
- It is important to stay small to retain a sense of community and to fit in with a suburban location.
- If the building design facilitates surveillance, there is no need for a security system: the tenants become the security system.
- Staff members' "unconditional regard" contributes to tenants' feelings and practice of autonomy.
- "This population can accept each other and build a community."

RECOMMENDATIONS

Considerable advice and information resulted from this case study for housing sponsors, architects and service providers. The main recommendations are as follows.

- Locate the building away from the downtown core, but within walking distance of shops and services and transit stops.
- Keep the housing project small. Thirty-two units is an ideal size.
- Design a beautiful building that is residential in character and that blends in with the neighbourhood. Ensure that it has a garden and trees surrounding it.
- Pay attention to sound transfer in the building and remember that the elevator is used 24 hours a day.
- Provide on-site staff 24 hours a day, seven days a week.
- Ensure that all on-site and visiting staff members share a client-centred, flexible approach to support and that they work co-operatively as a team. Ideally, staff members will be mature adults with considerable life experience.
- Provide one main communal meal per day for tenants, included as part of the monthly rent.
- When selecting tenants for a new supportive housing project, strive for a mix or balance of tenant characteristics, such as physical ability, mental health, sociability, talents and background. When seeking tenants for an established housing project, ensure that they will fit into the "community" that already lives in the building.

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Research Report: Supportive Housing for Homeless and Hard-to-House Seniors: An In-Depth Case Study

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